Social cohesion in displacement

The state of play

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Acronyms

BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
FCDO	(United Kingdom) Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme

1   Introduction

Social cohesion is loosely understood as the quality of relationships between different groups of people, and between those groups and the institutions that govern them. Humanitarian policy interest in this is on the rise, though it has been growing within development and peacebuilding circles for some time (Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Since 2020, there has been an increase in studies and research on social cohesion.[1] Growing interest in promoting social cohesion in displacement situations has not arisen by chance, but has emerged in the wake of a series of wider developments and agendas that are tied to 'social and economic moods as well as political and humanitarian interests' (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020: 18).

First is the urbanisation of displacement, which has forced policy actors to give greater attention to social cohesion. More than half of the world's refugees live in urban areas since the early 2010s, with the current level at approximately 60%.[2] Living alongside local residents in cities and towns can increase opportunities for social interactions between displaced people and the 'host community'.[3] Residing in such close proximity also places burdens on what are often already stretched public services, resulting in competition over resources and livelihood opportunities – all of which can lead to tensions and conflict (Tibaijuka, 2010; Pantuliano et al., 2012).

A second development contributing to growing interest in social cohesion is the increasingly protracted nature of displacement.[4] At the end of 2021, just under 16 million refugees – or three quarters of the global refugee population – were living in situations characterised by long periods of exile and separation from home (UNHCR, 2022a). As displacement becomes protracted, social relations can become strained, as displaced populations and the communities in which they settle interact more frequently and for longer periods of time, and as pressures and competition become prolonged (Jayakody et al., 2022). In these situations, an initial welcome by hosts can turn to fatigue on both sides when there seems to be no solution in sight. For example, Syrian refugees in Mafraq, Jordan initially received a warm reception by hosts, but this waned over time, resulting in many in the host community preferring that Syrian refugees be segregated in refugee camps (Mercy Corps, 2012).

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1   This has been driven in large part by a series of 26 working papers on forced displacement and social cohesion sponsored by the World Bank, United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Recent years have also seen an expansion in the impact evaluation evidence of programmes that build social cohesion between displaced communities and hosts.

2   However, figures are difficult to come by given the undocumented and informal conditions in which many urban displaced people live (Park, 2016; Crawford, 2021).

3   The authors recognise that the phrase 'host community' is problematic for several reasons, including that it is not a homogenous community, but rather comprises several different, diverse communities – some of whom may have also been previously displaced – with varying degrees of privilege and vulnerability. Moreover, 'host' implies a show of hospitality that is often, but by no means always, apparent. Nevertheless, this term will continue to be used throughout this project as a shorthand term for the various communities of people who were already living in an area where people have been displaced.

4   UNHCR (2022a) defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in another country.

Thirdly, the scale and the speed of the influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and later into some parts of Europe escalated concerns about refugee–host interactions, particularly as most Syrians moved into urban areas. While the concept of social cohesion – and related ideas under agendas like peacebuilding, co-existence and integration – goes back several decades in humanitarian circles, it was during this response that it gained most traction, becoming something of a buzzword, as well as a humanitarian objective for promoting positive interactions between hosts and refugees (Seyidov, 2021).[5]

Finally, renewed focus on social cohesion can be seen in relation to wider policy shifts occurring within the international refugee regime, which attempt to keep refugees from moving too far beyond their countries of origin by ensuring they settle peacefully with their hosts. Spurred on by the desire of European governments to 'restore order on its external borders' and avoid a 'repeat of the year 2015' when Syrian arrivals peaked, several policy processes were initiated, namely the New York Declaration in 2016, which outlined the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018 (Koran, 2016).

Given the growing consideration for social cohesion in the humanitarian sector in general and displacement settings in particular, it remains a vague and contested concept with little consensus on how to define or measure it (Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Likewise, knowledge about the conditions that promote or undermine social cohesion, or about the tangible and intangible benefits of social cohesion, remains limited (Delhey et al., 2018).

This paper provides an analytical foundation for a two-year project on social cohesion in displacement being carried out by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI. The project will explore social cohesion between refugees and host communities, as well as within displaced communities. It details how social cohesion has been conceptualised and operationalised in displacement responses. It draws on a wide body of literature, including from academia, United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, multilateral donors and governments. Each chapter of this paper identifies gaps, opportunities and subsequent implications for research, culminating in a series of specific research questions that provide a trajectory for the research project (though it may not be possible to answer all these questions). This paper will be followed by a series of case studies addressing these questions, and a final report that seeks to address two fundamental questions:

● How important is social cohesion in displacement settings?
● What role should aid actors play in supporting the aspects of social cohesion that matter to displacement-affected communities?

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5   The first Syrian Regional Response Plan in 2012 focused on supporting host communities 'to promote peaceful co-existence between host and refugee communities' (UN, 2012: 15). By the time of the sixth Regional Response Plan in 2014, social cohesion between hosts and refugees had become 'an important new aspect of the strategy' and a 'key objective in future' (UNHCR, 2013: 11). In the 2022 Regional Strategic Overview, 'Easing Social Tensions', social cohesion remains an important objective (UNDP and UNHCR, 2022).

2   Understanding social cohesion

Social cohesion is wide ranging and difficult to define concretely. The lack of consensus on defining social cohesion makes it difficult to measure since there are numerous factors that impact social cohesion in any particular setting – though much time and energy has been spent trying to do exactly this. This chapter lays out attempts to define social cohesion, with a focus on academia, domestic policy and the aid sector, as well as how social cohesion has been contextualised throughout the world.

2.1   Social cohesion as an aggregate concept

The concept of social cohesion traces its roots to Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist and one of the founders of modern sociology. Writing in 1897, Durkheim defined social cohesion as the interdependence of individuals within a society and identified it as the absence of latent social conflict and the presence of strong social bonds (Fonseca et al., 2019). Building on this, social cohesion is generally seen as a collective attribute – a 'communal "togetherness" in a collectivity of people' (Delhey et al., 2018: 430). Within this collective framing, social cohesion is often described as a kind of social 'glue' or 'bond' that emphasises reciprocity, mutuality, commonality, togetherness and community (Pelling and High, 2005; Larsen, 2014; Leininger et al., 2021).

2.1.1   Social cohesion in academia

Building on the work of Durkheim, many academics have created simple definitions of social cohesion that focus on three main concepts: trust; cooperation or participation; and a sense of belonging or inclusive identity (Peterson and Hughey, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Schmeets and Coumans, 2013; Dragolov et al., 2016; Schiefer and van der Noll, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Leininger et al., 2021).

Trust – similar to Durkheim's original conception of interdependence[6] – has been defined as the belief that other individuals, groups or institutions that could harm another individual will not do so, and the subsequent willingness of that individual to make themselves vulnerable (Kim et al., 2020).

The next two components correspond to Durkheim's strong social bonds. For the second, **cooperation** highlights the horizontal dimension of social cohesion – particularly when undertaken without incentives and for the common good (Leininger et al., 2021). By contrast, **participation** – including both political and sociocultural participation (Acket et al., 2011) – emphasises the vertical dimension (see Box 1).

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6   As Larsen (2014: 4) notes, 'Durkheim's interdependence argument points to a very fundamental aspect of modern society: we all need to interact with persons we do not know. This idea of interdependence [is] the backbone of the modern sociological thinking concerned with the issue of trust.'

For the final component, Jenson (1998) describes **inclusive identity** as allowing individuals to feel like they are part of the same community while Kim et al. (2020: 5) define a **sense of belonging** as 'the degree to which an individual or collective group feel like they "fit" together in a group'.

While none of these three components – trust, cooperation/participation and inclusive identity/sense of belonging – speak directly to Durkheim's third component of the absence of latent conflict, none of them would be possible to the same degree if conflict were present within or between groups of a society. Thus, while not explicitly stated in the modern equivalents of Durkheim's definition, the absence of conflict is inherent and underpins these understandings of social cohesion.

Box 1   Horizonal and vertical social cohesion

Social cohesion can be divided into horizontal and vertical, based on different types of social relations (Chan et al., 2006). Horizontal social cohesion refers to relationships between individuals and groups and can be further broken down into relationships between different communal groups and relationships within the same communal group, also referred to as intergroup and intragroup social cohesion respectively (Narayan, 1999; Delhey et al., 2018).

Vertical social cohesion describes relationships between individuals and institutions, or state and society, particularly in terms of how a society distributes goods and resources among different groups of people (Delhey et al., 2018). It is understood to be influenced by the level of equality and disparity within a society, though often it is the perception of fairness and the legitimacy of the distribution mechanisms (i.e. the state, markets, civil society or community) that matter more than actual levels of equality (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Márquez, 2010).

2.1.2   Social cohesion in domestic policy

Following on from the academic approaches spearheaded by Durkheim, a second, policy-oriented approach has emerged more recently. Domestic policy agendas in Australia, Canada and Luxembourg, for example, have sought to understand social cohesion indicators within their respective countries (Jenson, 1998; Dickes et al., 2008; Markus, 2010). Rather than thinking only theoretically about what constitutes social cohesion, this second approach expands social cohesion to include a wide range of economic, political and social components. It is related more practically to outcomes, such as equity, political order and well-being (Chan et al., 2006; Babajanian, 2012).

Just as Durkheim's study on social cohesion emerged from the large-scale upheaval of increasing industrialisation, urbanisation, democratisation and distinctions between classes, recent interest in social cohesion in domestic policy circles has also gained traction due to societies becoming more diverse and divided (Larsen, 2014). This renewed attention has been attributed to: the social and political strains of neoliberalism in the late 1990s and the resulting loss of confidence in public

institutions; increasing globalisation; the 'War on Terror'; economic stresses in the wake of the 2007–2011 financial crises; concerns around immigration following the so-called European migration crisis of 2015; and a growing narrative of ethno-cultural diversity, social malaise and inequality between rich and poor (Jenson, 1998; Markus, 2010; Acket et al., 2011; Larsen, 2014; Finn, 2017; Delhey et al., 2018).

2.1.3   Social cohesion in the aid sector

In the past decades, social cohesion has expanded from domestic policy agendas to international aid agendas, and particularly displacement situations. Most aid organisations have adopted definitions of social cohesion relatively recently – within the past 10 years – and these definitions often reflect the interests and mandates of the aid actors developing them.[7] Social cohesion has been described as plastic in that it can be moulded to meet specific goals and needs (Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Cheong et al. (2007: 43) describe it as a 'movable feast, aligned with the political and ideological positions of policy makers, practitioners and academics' while Bernard (1999: 49) calls it a flexible 'concept of convenience' that bends to one's needs.

These points are illustrated in Table 1 by aid organisations' emphasis on the parts of social cohesion that best align with their mandates. UN agencies and NGOs that are more development focused, for example, tend to emphasise vertical cohesion and the presence of strong social bonds over those that are more humanitarian focused, which are more likely to emphasis the absence of conflict. Other organisations use 'social cohesion' as a self-evident term in their documents without providing a definition.

The motivations for implementing projects aimed at enhancing social cohesion are also poorly explained by humanitarian and development organisations. A review of 30 World Bank-financed projects found that social cohesion was typically framed in project documents as an 'important issue' that 'interventions may affect', but the reasons why and how were typically left unaddressed (de Berry and Roberts, 2018: 15).

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7   For the purposes of this paper, 'aid actors' includes anyone who is involved in providing assistance to people in need, whether they be in the humanitarian, development or peacebuilding sectors.

Table 1   Definitions of social cohesion in the aid sector, as related to organisations' interests and mandate

Organisation	Mandate	Definition
Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) *and* International Rescue Committee (IRC)	Humanitarian	Both organisations highlight horizontal cohesion and rely on Fonseca et al.'s (2019) definition of social cohesion as comprising collective identity, mutual support and the absence of overt violence (Ahmed et al., 2021).
REACH	Humanitarian	REACH identifies the major elements of social cohesion as trust, participation and social ties, but also includes reducing inequality and a holistic approach to livelihoods, public services and socioeconomic interventions (REACH, 2014).
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	Development	UNDP emphasises vertical cohesion through 'trust in government' and participation 'collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals' (UNDP, 2020: 16)
UNHCR	Humanitarian	UNHCR focuses on horizontal cohesion and 'the ties which hold people together within a community'. It also narrows the parameters of these ties to the level of interaction, shared cultural or religious interests and the ability to minimise inequalities and avoid marginalisation (UNHCR et al., 2018: 16).
World Food Programme (WFP)	Humanitarian	WFP stresses horizontal cohesion and prioritises the absence of 'conflict before it turns violent, thus promoting peace and security' (WFP, 2021: 9).
World Vision	Humanitarian and development	World Vision focuses on both horizontal and vertical cohesion by judging high social cohesion as present where relationships (either between individuals and groups or with governing institutions) are strong, positive and integrated. By contrast, low social cohesion is characterised by relationships that are weak, negative or fragmented (Guay, 2015).

2.2   Social cohesion and related concepts

Social cohesion shares common traits with a number of related concepts, such as social integration, co-existence, self-reliance and inclusion. In displacement in particular, these concepts have often been used to explain, describe and understand the complex relationship between displaced communities and host communities.

Social integration is a key example of this. While the two concepts are not the same, they nonetheless converge in two main ways: their emphasis on social connections, and recognition that this

encompasses a two-way process between refugees and hosts. As argued by Strang and Ager (2010: 596), 'The centrality of social connections in understanding refugee integration is well established in both policy and academic literature'.

In their framework of integration, Ager and Strang (2008) identify four key domains of integration, one of which includes social connections within and between groups within the community.[8] These connections are commonly conceptualised as hinging on social bonds (with family and co-ethnic, co-national, co-religious or other forms of group), social bridges (with other communities) and social links (with the structures of the state) (Putnam, 1993; Ager and Strang, 2008; Easton-Calabria and Wood, 2020). This framing has clear parallels with above-mentioned ideas of intergroup and intragroup social cohesion, as well as horizontal and vertical social cohesion. While social bonds and bridges describe the horizontal linkages occurring along intra- and intergroup lines respectively, social links refer to the vertical connections between individuals and state structures.

Similar parallels can also be seen with other related concepts that have been used in displacement crises. Peaceful co-existence – a term that has been widely used by UNHCR since the 1990s – holds clear similarities with Durkheim's original emphasis on the interdependence of individuals within a society and in the absence of latent social conflict. Self-reliance also resonates with social cohesion.[9] While self-reliance is often framed in terms of the individual, 'in theory, at least, the "self" in self-reliance is a social self; not simply an autonomous individual, but a person embedded in wider social relations' (Betts et al., 2020: 62–63).

Social cohesion enhances refugee self-reliance by reinforcing the social aspects of people's lives – networks, psychosocial capacity, values and capabilities – which are typically overshadowed by economic and technical considerations for earning sufficient money to cover basic necessities (Mookherjee and Easton-Calabria, 2017; Field et al., 2017). Indeed, some argue that self-reliance is increasingly employed as a 'back-route' to achieving wider goals of social cohesion and stability and alleviating tensions (Carpi, 2020: 233).

Social cohesion is also part of the wider puzzle of inclusion, particularly since one of the generally agreed components of social cohesion is an inclusive identity. Social inclusion and inclusion in humanitarian practice are closely linked concepts: social networks and connections can help break down the barriers to humanitarian assistance and promote equal rights and participation in humanitarian responses (Barbelet and Wake, 2020). With these similarities in mind, the concept

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8   The other three domains are: (1) achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; (2) assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; and (3) structural barriers to social connections related to language, culture and the local environment (Ager and Strang, 2008).

9   Self-reliance is defined by UNHCR (2005: 1) as 'the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity'.

of social cohesion should not be seen as a new concept. Rather, it should be understood as part of a longer evolution in displacement theory, policy and practice and an ongoing discussion around refugee–host interactions more generally.

2.3   Translating social cohesion

Since social cohesion is an aggregate concept without a clear understanding on which scholars, policymakers and practitioners agree, it is not surprising that it is a difficult concept to translate into different languages, traditions and cultures across the globe. Most research on social cohesion has been carried out in English-speaking countries – Australia, Canada, the United States – and throughout Europe (Jenson, 1998; Markus, 2010; de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Ozcurumez and Hoxha, 2020).

Researchers who have looked at regional and local understandings of social cohesion outside of this English-language and Eurocentric framework tend to take one of three approaches, detailed below.

Approach 1: Assume that English-language and Eurocentric definitions of social cohesion can be translocated to another context, occasionally with the inclusion of additional aspects.

Research that adopts this approach tends to be funded by donors from anglophone and European countries, and aims to analyse how social cohesion can be improved in other parts of the world. For example, the 'Measuring social cohesion in Latin America' project by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which was funded by the European Commission, uses three 'pillars' – institutions, disparities and a sense of belonging – to measure social cohesion (Márquez, 2010). Similarly, the 'Social cohesion in Africa' project by the German Development Institute, which is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), relies on the three main components of social cohesion outlined above (trust, cooperation for the common good and an inclusive identity), applying these to data from the Afrobarometer surveys to measure social cohesion (Leininger et al., 2021).[10]

This approach, while arguably the easiest and most straightforward to adopt, is not without criticism. In Latin America, for example, Márquez (2010) notes that the European assumption that social cohesion can only be achieved by reducing social disparities or ensuring participation in democratic societies does not work in Latin America, as the region has some of the highest levels of economic and political inequality in the world. Instead, in Latin America, social cohesion is more closely related to family and other primary relationships, which act as the 'glue' holding people together. In Latin America, then, social cohesion is affected more by crime, mistrust and the family than politics and economics, as it is in Europe (ibid.). Other researchers have proposed adding aspects missing from the English-language/

10   Afrobarometer is a survey network that has been conducting public opinion polls on various topics across Africa since 1999. The current surveys are carried out every 2–3 years in 35 countries. More information can be found at www.afrobarometer.org.

European definitions of social cohesion to fit the concept to other locations. Canal Alban et al. (2010), for example, suggest broadening it to also include environmental sustainability, due to the diversity found in Latin America's ecosystems and societies' dependence on these natural resources.

Approach 2: Relate the English-language/Eurocentric idea of social cohesion to similar concepts that already exist within the context and culture being studied.

Following this approach, some scholars trace social cohesion back to the 14th century Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldun, and the term *assabiyah,* which has been loosely translated as social cohesion or social tribal solidarity (see, for example, Al-Jayyousi, 2017; Harb, 2017 and Safar et al., 2017). As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (2022) note, more recent translations of 'social cohesion' into Arabic, as found in UN and NGO documents written in Arabic, employ other cognates that evoke similar ideas, such as social homogeneity (*tajãnus `ijtīmã'ī* or *insijãm `ijtīma'ī*) or common social ties (*rawãbet `ijtīma'īyah*).

Similarly, in sub-Saharan Africa, Lefko-Everett (2016: 7) claims that 'there are parallels between social cohesion and *ubuntu* – a concept shared across many cultural groups and with variations in multiple languages', which, like the Arab scholar Khaldun, pre-dates the work of Durkheim and other early European scholars. Although largely used in studies on social cohesion in South Africa (see, for example, Desai, 2015 and Burns et al., 2018), *ubuntu* is a pan-African concept – often found under a different name in different languages – that embodies core values such as solidarity, caring, hospitality and interdependence (Kamwangamalu, 1999).

Likewise, many Asian languages and cultures have concepts that stress the collective over the individual and therefore that include similar aspects of social cohesion as understood in Europe and English-speaking countries. However, they directly translate to other words that are related to, but not exactly the same as, 'cohesion' (Croissant and Walkenhorst, 2020). In Korean, for example, social cohesion is ambiguously translated as *sahoetonghab,* but this word is also used for concepts such as 'social integration' and 'social inclusion' (Croissant and Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, in all of these contexts, the replacement of one concept with another, pre-existing concept is often retroactive and somewhat artificial.

Approach 3: Admit there is no linguistic equivalent of the term and use the English language/ Eurocentric definition in its place.

This approach is the least pervasive. One study, looking at regional and local understandings of social cohesion in 22 Asian countries, admitted that there are no direct linguistic equivalents to social cohesion in any of the region's major languages and instead used a social cohesion index developed in Germany to analyse whether the same components had similar impacts on social cohesion in Asia as they did in the west. Overall, they found that differing outcomes between the west and elsewhere suggest that using a European understanding of social cohesion is unlikely to identify cohesive societies or help increase social cohesion in all contexts.

2.4   Implications for research

Rather than starting with a one-size-fits-all definition, this project will refocus attention back to the people affected by displacement – both refugees and host communities – and will explore what aspects of social cohesion are important to them. It will avoid using definitions that do not reflect their viewpoints, as this would increase 'the risk of negating the effectiveness of the word – and the outcome – altogether' (Mookherjee and Easton-Calabria, 2017). Having understood social cohesion from a displacement perspective, the research will compare this to the typical definitions and understandings of social cohesion emanating from policy and academia, in order to highlight the extent to which these overlap and diverge in practice.

This project will focus only on horizontal social cohesion, both intergroup between refugees and host communities and intragroup within refugee communities.[11] Moreover, it acknowledges that the factors that influence social cohesion are messy and not strictly delineated into horizontal or vertical axes. For example, many aspects of vertical cohesion – such as how a state responds to a crisis, what types of institutional support are available for both refugees and hosts, and how fair they perceive society to be – have a profound impact on horizonal cohesion. These effects will be included in the research, even while the specific aspects of vertical cohesion are left unexplored.

Box 2   Understanding social cohesion: possible research questions

- How do displaced and host communities understand social cohesion in their own context and terms?
- What aspects of social cohesion are most or less important to displaced and host communities, and why?
- How do priorities for social cohesion change over time among displaced people and host communities?
- How do displaced people and host communities manage their relationships with each other?

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11   This research will not focus on intragroup cohesion within host communities as it would make the scope and scale of the research too large.

3   Operationalising social cohesion in displacement

Although the term 'social cohesion' gained prominence following the Syrian refugee response, similar concepts have existed within humanitarian action for decades. Some previous efforts to operationalise social cohesion within and between different groups of people focused on return and reconciliation in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the late 1990s, CARE (1997) attempted to foster social cohesion in Rwanda through community development projects. Around the same time, UNDP established youth centres throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina to build social cohesion and increase interactions between ethnic groups (OCHA, 1998).

From 2001 to 2002, UNHCR implemented the 'Imagine Coexistence' project in both Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This project aimed to 'deepen UNHCR's understanding of the elements needed to promote coexistence in divided societies' through joint activities devised 'to help overcome deeply entrenched mistrust among different ethnic groups, and to (re)build relationships and promote cooperation within these communities' (UN Trust Fund for Human Security, 2017). A review of these activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina found that they did achieve success in improving trust between divided communities and strengthening relationships between ethnic groups, but they were hampered by the short-term design and limited funding given to them, leaving some communities feeling abandoned when the projects ended (Haider, 2008).

Little has changed in the way social cohesion has been operationalised by humanitarian actors since the late 1990s and early 2000s. Interventions that explicitly set out to influence social cohesion as a specific goal do so by focusing on the relational networks, interactions, ties and interdependencies between groups of people. What has changed, however, is the humanitarian consciousness of how all projects and programmes may impact relations within and between groups, with the most obvious example of this shift being the increase in the amount of assistance and attention given to host communities.

Indeed, the tensions that can arise between refugees and hosts – who are often equally poor and vulnerable – motivate many aid organisations to give aid to host communities (Walton, 2012). While the most common split in humanitarian programming is 70% to refugees and 30% to hosts, some responses have recently begun to divide resources equally between the two communities.[12] Whatever percentage used, a strict division of resources between the displaced and host communities remains a crude measure that tends not to consider other factors that may also contribute to people's needs and vulnerabilities, such as legal status and associated rights to move and work.

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12   The 70:30 split appears in Bangladesh (Food Security Cluster, 2018), Ukraine (Harris, 2018) and Uganda (O'Callaghan, 2018), among others. Responses that are splitting resources equally include the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, which targets 3.2 million people – 1.5 million Lebanese, 1.5 million Syrians and roughly 200,000 Palestinians in Lebanon (UN Lebanon, 2022).

3.1   Programmes with a specific social cohesion objective

Social cohesion is now a key feature of responses to displacement among aid actors and governments. As an emerging strategic priority in responses across the world, it explicitly features in many response plans – including, for example, the Syrian regional response (UNHCR, 2013), the Rohingya response (ISCG, 2019) and the South Sudan regional refugee response (UNHCR, 2022b). In the Venezuela regional refugee and migrant response, integration has been elevated to the sectoral level, and promoting social cohesion through advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns and the socioeconomic integration of refugees and migrations is its third priority area (R4V, 2021). This high-level emphasis on social cohesion has also trickled down to individual projects, with many using 'improving social cohesion' as a catch-all goal or desired outcome, even when it is not supported by a logical theory of change.

Interventions implemented by governments and aid actors that explicitly aim to improve social cohesion can be further divided into three categories.

1. **Direct-contact interventions** are projects and programmes that seek to improve social cohesion by providing opportunities for direct contact between different groups of people (most often between refugees and hosts, though occasionally within refugee communities). This may occur in programmes that involve refugees and hosts as participants at the same time, or via projects that require refugees and hosts to use the same facilities (Lowe, 2022).
2. **No-contact interventions** are projects and programmes that promote improved relations without having the two groups come into contact with one another. This can be done by either increasing knowledge and awareness of other groups or by improving conditions that have previously led to social tension between groups.
3. **Advocacy initiatives** improve social cohesion by influencing public opinion of refugees through the media or by pushing for legislative reform to create more hospitable conditions.

Social cohesion interventions – whether direct contact, no contact or advocacy – can be further separated out by the array of sectors in which they take place: compensation-, market-, education-, leisure-, social protection- or governance-based.[13] Table 2 shows typical examples of interventions organised both by type of contact and by sector with social cohesion explicit in either the design or approach. In the research that informed this table, only one example of an intervention targeting intragroup social cohesion among refugees was found – a sports tournament held in Bangladesh to improve relationships between different groups of Rohingya refugees.

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13   These distinctions and categories were derived from analysing interventions that explicitly mentioned 'social cohesion' and 'refugees' on Relief Web. While there could be numerous other ways to organise this information, the purpose of categorising the information in this way is to show the breadth of programmes implemented by governments and aid actors that are aimed at improving social cohesion in refugee settings.

Table 2   Typical examples of social cohesion interventions

	Direct contact	No contact	Advocacy
Compensation-based[i]	Providing durable housing for refugees and hosts in combined communities	Upgrading water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in host communities	Announcing clearly that money and aid coming to a community is due to their hosting of refugees
Market-based	Community gardens farmed by refugees and hosts who then sell their produce at local markets	Skills training courses to help refugees integrate into labour market	Pushing for legislative reform for refugee financial inclusion
Education-based	Integrated schools for refugees and hosts	Adult language courses for refugees	Media campaigns countering discrimination and xenophobia
Leisure-based	Sporting tournaments between refugees and hosts	Theatre nights promoting peacebuilding	Refugee photography project and exhibition in host community
Social policy-based	Integrating refugees into national education systems	Including refugees in national vaccination campaigns	Advocating for the inclusion of refugees in social protection systems
Governance-based	Local committees with representatives from both communities to discuss and solve issues	Training camp management to resolve disputes	Promoting the inclusion of refugees in local government structures

i   i.e. when members of host communities are compensated for hosting refugees in their communities.

While a wide array of different interventions addressing social cohesion exists, the extent to which these actually improve social cohesion is unclear. Even those interventions that explicitly cite social cohesion as an aim in their design or approach remain theoretical in their intended outcomes. They have been critiqued for making overly optimistic claims about building social cohesion, or for making simplistic linkages between cohesion and community-driven development, participative decision-making, employment and livelihoods, and social protection (de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Most of the projects and programmes that claim to improve social cohesion use the term in their advertising and promotional materials, but go no further than this. If these programmes are measuring and evaluating their impact on social cohesion by tracking indicators, by and large, they are not publishing the results (ibid.).

Of the studies that have published results, only a few have found compelling instances of improved social cohesion, and these tend to be on a small scale (Valli et al., 2019; Lowe, 2022). For example, a study of Syrian and Turkish children who participated in a programme focused on empathy as a way of fostering social cohesion found that the programme lowered incidents of violence and bullying while increasing cooperation among classmates. More research, however, is needed to assess whether these changes will last, particularly once these students begin middle school in a new environment and with new classmates (Alan et al., 2020).

A systematic review of programmes that aimed to improve social cohesion in fragile contexts found several key challenges for achieving their objectives, such as accurately identifying the issues that were preventing better cohesion, a lack of conflict assessments and the inability to address structural changes underpinning security concerns (Sonnenfeld et al., 2021). These challenges are amplified further in aid interventions that do not consider their effects on social cohesion in their design and implementation (Paluck and Green, 2009; Scacco and Warren, 2018; Mousa, 2021).

3.2   Unintended effects of aid in general on social cohesion

Beyond projects and programmes that explicitly seek to improve social cohesion, aid programming writ large can often have unintended consequences – both positive and negative – on the quality of relations within refugee communities and between refugee and host communities. As Guay (2015: 11) notes, 'poorly planned aid can contribute to increased divisions between competing groups, undermine local conflict resolution and exacerbate power inequities'. What aid is given, how it is distributed and to whom, can all have a bearing on social cohesion.

Aid given in-kind can affect social cohesion when there are perceptions that refugees receive more support than similarly vulnerable people in the host community, or when reselling items for cash (to buy other items, pay bills or repay debts) affects local markets. In Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, for example, research suggests that tensions between refugees and hosts stem from the implication that refugees have access to better education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities due to the support they receive from UNHCR and other aid organisations (Anomat Ali et al., 2017). In Cameroon, food aid given in-kind was often resold below market value by refugees for cash, which undercut local sellers (Levine et al., 2022). But displaced people who received in-kind aid occasionally shared this with members of the host population whom they knew were in need (ibid.).

While the shift to cash-based aid has been welcomed in the humanitarian sector as a more dignified way of assisting people, it can still cause tensions when markets are not sufficiently considered (Vogel et al., 2021). For example, in Lebanon, rental grants given to Syrian refugees drove up rental prices with negative impacts on poor Lebanese families in the same area (Guay, 2015). Similarly, in Colombia, a Venezuelan migrant reported cashing school subsidy vouchers away from their neighbourhoods so they are not seen, as the availability of local schools did not expand in line with migrant arrivals, and Venezuelan children may be perceived to be taking places that 'belong' to Colombian children (Ham et al., 2022). Cash assistance can also have a positive effect: in Lebanon, it was found to increase mutual support between Syrian refugee beneficiaries and communities, as well as decrease tensions within refugee households (Lehmann and Masterson, 2014).

Finally, who receives aid can cause social tensions, both within refugee communities and between refugees and hosts. Within displaced communities, targeting is often a source of tension, as recipients and non-recipients alike often do not understand why some receive aid and others do not (Grandi et al., 2018; Samuels et al., 2020).

3.3   The responsibility for improving social cohesion

Questions remain around who is responsible for social cohesion between and within different communities. Social cohesion is often framed as a domestic issue associated with social engineering, state-building and national identity formation (Browne, 2013). Navigating a role for external aid actors is therefore a sensitive issue in displacement contexts – particularly those characterised by competing political agendas. With this in mind, much of the social cohesion literature advocates for municipalities playing the central role, particularly when it comes to service provision for all residents irrespective of their legal status (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2022). In spite of this, it is typically non-state actors who take the lead in designing and implementing social cohesion programming, though their narrow conceptions and remits can have unintended consequences if wider issues are not properly understood.

Political sensitivities take on an added significance in displacement contexts where host states may be reluctant to support initiatives, such as social cohesion, that are seen to promote long-term local integration over the preferred option of return or resettlement. Furthermore, national governments and external aid actors often interpret social cohesion based on juxtaposing rationales. For example, freedom of movement is seen by international actors working on refugee issues as a key component in building self-reliance, inclusion and social cohesion (Crawford and O'Callaghan, 2019; Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020). In their view, a refugee cannot be self-reliant, fully included or socially accepted in a society when their rights to move, study, access healthcare, build a livelihood and earn an income are curtailed by national law and practice. In contrast, however, many refugee-hosting governments take the opposite view. They tend to view inclusive policies as a risk to national peace and stability and, consequently, use social cohesion as a reason to justify – rather than relax – refugee restrictions and containment policies (Aksoy and Ginn, 2022).

This resonates with ideas of the front- and backstage performances of 'humanitarian theatre' (Desportes et al., 2019). Frontstage, humanitarian actors can be seen to be making progress through specific and well-defined projects. Backstage, however, the underlying structural context and wider political agendas limit opportunities for significant change, leaving the status quo of social (in)cohesion relatively intact (Jaspars et al., 2020).

Although it may be possible to improve social cohesion at the local level, national-level impacts remain out of reach (Albarosa and Elsner, 2022). While this may be true, by prioritising practices that shape and foster social cohesion at the community level instead of tackling more thorny policy obstacles and discourses at the national level, interventions are likely to only scratch the surface of social cohesion. There are likely to be limits to what interventions driven by external aid actors can ultimately achieve in promoting social cohesion through individual projects (Fearon et al., 2009; Browne 2013).

3.4   Implications for research

Rather than start from the point of social cohesion as an unquestionably justified aim, this project will analyse how, when and in which ways aid actors should seek to influence social cohesion within and between refugee and host communities. It will endeavour to understand what humanitarian interventions can realistically expect to achieve depending on the larger structural and contextual factors at play and examine which aspects of social cohesion programming should be emphasised or avoided. Rather than just a case of 'doing social cohesion better', this study will assess whether actors should potentially be doing less.

To do so, this study will also explore what those who are the targeted recipients of both explicit social cohesion and other humanitarian programming perceive to be the impact of aid interventions on their relationships with each other and with their local communities. The research will seek to understand the impact of different types of interventions on social cohesion and question whether these interventions are 'doing no harm' based on what aid is given, how it is distributed and to whom it is allocated.

Box 3   Operationalising social cohesion in displacement: possible research questions

- How do different aid actors interpret the concept of social cohesion?
- To what extent have interventions designed to affect social cohesion achieved their intended aims?
- What are the unintended effects of aid on social cohesion in displacement settings?
- Why do aid actors think improving social cohesion is important?
- What have actors tried to achieve through their work in relation to social cohesion in the short, medium and long term?
- Which aspects of social cohesion should aid actors address? Which aspects might they be less able to address?

4 Influencing social cohesion in displacement

There is a lack of clarity about which aspects of displacement upset existing balances in society, giving rise to pressures and changes that influence outcomes for social cohesion (de Berry and Roberts, 2018). Six main factors tend to emerge from across the academic and grey literature:

1. the amount and quality of contact between communities;
2. the scale, speed and duration of displacement;
3. spatial living configurations, in particular whether refugees reside in closed camps, open settlements or are integrated into urban settings;
4. competition over scarce resources;
5. ethnic, religious and linguistic allegiances;
6. the role of aid and assistance on social relations (see Chapter 3).

The level of influence of these factors on social cohesion is explored in more detail in the sections below. The analysis highlights a key observation: there is little to no consensus about whether or how these factors associated with displacement influence social cohesion. Depending on the study, each is found to simultaneously improve and erode social cohesion or have limited or no discernible impact whatsoever. In any given setting, a range of other context-specific drivers, actors and characteristics come together to blur and obscure the relationship between displacement and social cohesion – making it hard, if not impossible, to make wider generalisations or discern trends. This reflects the difficulty of linking causation and effect when it comes to complex social phenomena like social cohesion (Danermark et al., 2001).

4.1 The amount and quality of contact between communities

There are two main schools of thought when it comes to how contact between displaced and host communities affects social cohesion. On the one hand, contact theory assumes that social interactions between diverse groups of people can reduce prejudice and, by extension, increase cohesion. Relationships of trust and reciprocity are built upon repeated social exchange (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Vemuru et al., 2020). Building on these ideas, studies have found that Lebanese residents coming into direct contact with Syrian refugees are more likely to 'support hosting refugees, to consider hiring a refugee, or to allow one of their children to marry a refugee' (Ghosn et al., 2019: 118). In Kenya, perceptions of refugees among Turkana hosts were most positive among those residing near Kakuma camp and who come into more regular contact with refugees (Sanghi et al., 2016). Likewise, in Nigeria, regular social contact between Christian and Muslim young men reduced discriminatory tendencies between these groups (Scacco and Warren, 2018).

On the other hand, advocates of conflict theory argue that the more diverse a society, the less cohesive it is likely to be. At least in the short and medium term, 'immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and inhibit social capital' (Putnam, 2007: 138). The rationale is that people identify with and favour members of their particular group: 'One's own group is seen as the *in-group*, whereas members of other ethnic groups are seen as the *out-group*' (Albarosa and Elsner, 2022: 9). Conflict-theory thinking has gained momentum in Europe, prompting growing support for a common national identity, citizenship and civic integration (Gozdecka et al., 2014).

In spite of the persuasiveness of these contrasting (though not contradictory) theories, other studies downplay the relevance of contact/conflict theory rationale altogether. Albarosa and Elsner (2022) caution that the forces of contact and conflict theory can hold true simultaneously or at different stages of displacement. While there is now muted acceptance – within academia at least – of the prevailing logic of contact theory, evidence also suggests that contact interventions produce weak effects (Paluck et al., 2019). Allport (1954) argues that outcomes of contact theory are not automatic, but rest on four conditions that are rarely met in displacement contexts: equal status, common goals, inter-group cooperation and support from authorities. Likewise, changes in behaviour brought about by contact do not necessarily reflect more fundamental changes in personal beliefs or spill over into the wider community (IPA, 2020; Mousa, 2021).

These more nuanced interpretations of contact and conflict theories are a reminder that the factors that influence social cohesion remain ambiguous, are open to negotiation, ebb and flow over time and are highly context specific.

4.2   The scale, speed and duration of displacement

It is widely reported and commonly accepted that situations of displacement negatively affect social cohesion by disrupting social dynamics, stressing local economies and altering demographics (Finn, 2017; de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Pham et al., 2022). In particular, a large, sudden and protracted influx of refugees is routinely associated with poor outcomes for social cohesion. Research in the Greek islands found that hostility towards refugees was higher among islanders experiencing a rapid and large influx than among those who received fewer or no refugees (Hangartner et al., 2019). In Germany, violence towards Syrian refugees was higher in areas experiencing a high inflow of refugees than those where the influx was relatively low – though other factors, such as unemployment levels and share of right-wing votes, also played an influencing role in levels of violence (Albarosa and Elsner, 2022).

Group threat hypothesis between minority and majority groups – originally elaborated by Blumer (1958) and Blalock (1967) in relation to American racial prejudice – can provide a rationale for why a large, sudden and protracted influx can create social tensions. The larger the minority group, the bigger the sense of social, economic, political and physical threat felt by the resident majority, and the higher the level of hostility towards refugees (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes, 2017). This is compounded by the often unfair sentiment that an influx of refugees brings insecurity – by importing fighters, arms and ideologies that contribute to violence and conflict (Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006; Lischer, 2017).

Populist politics have also played a role in promoting fear and anxiety about the scale and speed of the influx. In Germany, for example, the populist Alternative für Deutschland shifted its focus from economic issues to immigration and refugees, stoking xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, following the government's decision to accept nearly a million Syrian refugees (Gedmin, 2019).

Nevertheless, quantitative research on low- and middle-income countries suggests that large numbers of refugee arrivals do not necessarily have a discernible negative effect on hosts' attitudes towards refugees in the short term (Aksoy and Ginn, 2022). Likewise, meta-analysis leads Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes (2017: 244) to conclude that 'size only matters within a fairly narrow framework'. Firstly, perceived rather than actual size often plays a more influential role. Secondly, most research on this question has focused on a small number of rich democracies, and these findings may not be applicable to lower-income countries that host most displaced persons (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017; Zhou et al., 2022). And thirdly, size, speed and duration tell only part of the story. A host of other context-specific and pre-existing actors and characteristics need to be taken into account – a consideration that is relevant to nearly all findings on social cohesion. This suggests that while the arrival of refugees is related to social tensions, it is not necessarily their cause (Guay, 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2022).

4.3   Spatial living configurations

Spatial living configurations and, in particular, whether refugees reside in closed camps, open settlements or are integrated into urban settings, open up and shut down opportunities for cohabitation, interaction and participation (Zetter and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; De Berry and Robert, 2018). This can impact social cohesion in complex and contradictory ways – making it difficult to draw clear generalisations or trends about this relationship. Aksoy and Ginn (2022: 35) find few discernible patterns among low- and middle-income countries: 'the positive and negative effects of concentration on the host communities appear to balance on average.'

They argue that what matters is not where refugees reside (in a camp, settlement or urban context), but how these different settings are configured and designed, including the kinds of opportunities and resources provided to refugees, and the extent to which these are shared with hosts.

A similarly mixed picture emerges from research in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda – where rural and urban hosts hold contradictory feelings about refugees according to social, economic and security priorities (Betts et al., 2022). Given the relative significance of humanitarian and development investments in otherwise neglected rural areas, rural hosts in camp settings recognised refugees' contribution to the local economy – in particular in the creation of local jobs and economic opportunities, as well as development resources for improved infrastructure and services – but they also saw refugees in camp settings as a security threat. Urban hosts, by contrast, felt less physically threatened by the presence of refugees, but they were more likely than those residing in proximity to rural camps to perceive refugees as economic competition and a burden. While rural hosts were economically more tolerant

than their urban counterparts, it was urban hosts who held more progressive views when it came to refugee rights. As Betts et al. (2022: 28) note, 'these "mixed" sentiments – positive and negative – are not mutually exclusive, but rather co-existent in host society'.

A clearer picture emerges from a review of refugee inclusion in 22 African countries conducted by Zhou (2018). But even then, moods and preferences are shown to shift and evolve over time. Hosts that reside near refugee settlements tended to hold more negative attitudes about refugees and were more likely to support restrictions on citizenship access compared to those who live further away. 'Positive spillovers', such as service delivery improvements, could reduce these proximity-related tensions and help contribute to social cohesion (Zhou et al., 2022: 24). What is more, this initial hostility towards refugees in camp-like settings was strongest for newer refugee sites and tended to soften after several years (Zhou, 2018; Coniglio et al., 2022). After the initial shock, the gradual diffusion of positive economic contributions stemming from the presence of a camp economy reduces the immediate social tensions that undermine cohesion (ibid.).

4.4   Competition over scarce resources

A sudden and significant influx of displaced people can put pressure on resources and opportunities, in particular jobs, housing, food, basic services, water, land and fuel. Refugees are often confined to politically and economically marginal areas characterised by environmental scarcity. Under these circumstances, an influx of refugees can create tensions with hosts who come to see them as a threat to the maintenance of their own well-being and livelihoods (see, among others, Walton, 2012; Fajth et al., 2019; Mercy Corps, 2019; Betts et al., 2022).

According to the World Bank (2022), this chain of events can 'exacerbate inequalities and the potential for conflict' in the absence of inclusive policies and development investments for both displaced people and their hosts. In Kenya, for example, competition over limited livelihood assets – in particular land, water and firewood – was the main source of tension and conflict between refugee and host communities (Anomat Ali et al., 2017). In Djibouti and Ethiopia, while competition between refugees and hosts is not so severe as to result in full-blown conflict, it nevertheless has been found to limit opportunities for intergroup cooperation (Smith et al., 2021).

Yet, social dynamics between refugees and hosts are not inevitably underscored by competition and conflict. Firstly, interpretations of competition are often driven by perception rather than reality. Information about refugee impacts and aid distribution are often not well circulated or understood. Hosts in Ethiopia and Djibouti routinely associated refugees with environmental resource depletion, even though remote-sensing data shows this is not the case (ibid.). What is more, host community perspectives about refugees are often formed and reinforced in an echo chamber of gossip and common narratives within households and with their neighbours (Betts et al., 2022). Media discourse and social media also play a key role in driving inaccurate popular narratives (Gale, 2004; Dandy and Pe-Pua, 2015; Pandır, 2020; Stieglitz and Ross, 2022).

Secondly, competition between hosts and refugees ebbs and flows over time, and often emerges in the context of wider dynamics and pressures rather than increased social interactions. In many cases, protracted displacement exacerbates long-term concerns over competition and access (Brun, 2010; Ferris and Halff, 2011). In Iran, as is likely in many countries, refugee–host competition over resources is exacerbated during economic crises (Hoseini and Dideh, 2022).

Thirdly, competition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive, but can co-exist. The presence of refugees often brings a wide range of economic benefits and opportunities (e.g. jobs, services, markets, investments), particularly to hosts residing in peripheral, marginalised and underinvested areas (Loschmann et al., 2019). These benefits can soften exposure to and perceptions of competition, but only for those who can access and benefit from them (Whitaker, 2002). In Uganda, for example, landlords and business owners who capitalise on refugee tenants and customers held more positive views of refugees than poorer residents who face greater competition for jobs and housing (Betts et al., 2022). Likewise, in Iran, negative perceptions were more pronounced among hosts from poor districts who had limited productive resources and were therefore more likely to perceive Afghan refugees as a threat to their jobs (Hoseini and Dideh, 2022). With this in mind, 'a complex set of relationships have emerged around these economic interactions, including both cooperation and competition' (Betts et al., 2020: 11).

Similar dynamics can be seen among refugees. Refugees who find work and benefit economically tend to have a more positive perception of host communities than those who are excluded from job opportunities or limited to exploitative arrangements characterised by low and irregular pay and poor working conditions (Betts et al., 2022). Likewise, in Jordan, it was Syrian refugees' (rather than just hosts') fear of being an economic burden that contributed to social distance between hosts and refugees (Tobin et al., 2021).

4.5   Ethnic, religious and linguistic allegiances

It is generally assumed that refugees and hosts are more likely to get along when they share ethnic, religious or linguistic ties (Guay, 2015). The Somali region of Ethiopia is a widely cited case in point: a long history of shared ethnic identity and cultural bonds have arguably laid the foundations for solidarity between different groups (Vemuru et al., 2020). These ethnic, linguistic and religious similarities have created opportunities for incoming refugees to settle, integrate and be included in society. Yet, while relations between Ethiopian Somalis and Somali refugees may be easier, they are not inevitably cohesive. According to Carver (2020: 14):

> No easy assumptions can be made that one group of people living in close proximity to another will necessarily be welcome because of shared language or ethnic identity.

There are highly complex and subtle differences in clan hierarchies, subject to change and renegotiation (ibid.). Similarly, in other parts of Ethiopia and Djibouti, as well as Cameroon, shared ethnicity between refugees and hosts helped to avoid full-blown competition or conflict, but it did not always lead to harmonious cooperation or resource-sharing either (Barbelet, 2017; Smith et al., 2021).

These examples suggest that ethnic, religious and linguistic similarities are not a guarantee of social cohesion, though they do make some difference. In Colombia, for example, political will to develop an effective joint response to the Venezuelan influx was driven, among other things, by shared cultural ties and language between displaced Venezuelans and Colombian hosts (Ham et al., 2022). Research from East Africa finds positive relations between Somali Ethiopians/Somali Kenyans and Somali refugees – reinforced by close living proximity and shared participation in madrassa schools, mosques, and volunteer and social activities (Betts et al., 2022). Importantly, these shared ethnic bonds work both ways, and play an important role in shaping refugees' perceptions of their host, as well as vice versa (ibid.). In Iran, for example, while most Iranians trust Afghan refugees as caretakers or guards for their buildings, refugees hold a 'cynical view toward an unknown Iranian' (Hoseini and Dideh, 2022: 14).

4.6   Implications for research

Static constructs, generalisable trends and unilateral relationships reveal little about social cohesion and displacement. A more nuanced, context-specific and long-term approach to research on social cohesion and displacement is needed to adequately capture these evolving dynamics. While the project will look to identify patterns and trends where these exist, it will avoid condensing findings into all-encompassing conclusions.

Social cohesion research should view conflict and diversity as intrinsic parts of the wider fabric of all societies and go beyond the narrow paradigm of displacement-related issues (de Berry and Roberts, 2018). This requires closer inspection of the ways in which everyday social practices and interactions influence social cohesion. Studies have found, for example, that the kinds of tensions occurring between Syrian refugees and their Turkish hosts were similar to the issues faced by neighbours the world over, such as children making too much noise or leaving rubbish around (WFP, 2018). While the scale of these impacts and use of these complaints as an outlet for social tensions may be higher between refugees and hosts, such fault lines are nonetheless characteristic of all societies.

Box 4   Influencing social cohesion in displacement: possible research questions

- Which factors drive or undermine social cohesion between and within communities in different contexts?
- Are there clear patterns in factors across respondents and case studies? And if not, what explains differences in patterns?
- In what ways does social cohesion between and within communities change over time? And to what do different actors attribute those changes?

5   Problematising social cohesion in displacement

Social processes – such as cohesion, networks, inclusion and capital – are often assumed to be inherent social goods to be worked towards (Pelling and High, 2005). Social cohesion is often simplistically and apolitically presented as a positive foundation for development, growth, peacebuilding and conflict resolution (King et al., 2010; King, 2013). These assumptions overlook the underlying risks, limitations and inconsistencies that are embedded in all social processes.

Some of these have already been raised, such as the prioritisation of thinking and approaches to social cohesion from English-speaking and European countries over localised, context-specific approaches; the lack of clarity around whether and how aid influences social cohesion, leading to overly optimistic claims, unintended effects and difficulties in monitoring and evaluating; and the lack of consensus on whether or how wider factors associated with displacement (such as contact, the nature of the influx, resource competition, allegiances and the role of aid) influence social cohesion. Building on these, this chapter addresses additional legal, political and conceptual issues associated with social cohesion and displacement.

5.1   Political projects of national unity and assimilation

Socially cohesive societies do not have to live in perfect harmony. Rather, cohesion should be about managing difference and tensions through mutual recognition and belonging, so that these do not spill over into conflict, and finding a balance that both transcends and encompasses diversity and difference (de Berry and Roberts, 2018; Lennox, 2018). Nevertheless, when aspects of social cohesion – such as togetherness, collectivity, community, belonging and inclusive identity – are co-opted by political projects designed to build national unity at the expense of diversity and pluralism, social cohesion comes with significant risks.

Under these scenarios, the concept of social cohesion can be exploited or used by dominant groups to mobilise conflict against others (Portes and Vickstrom, 2011; Browne, 2013). Many internal conflicts are orchestrated by organised groups (rather than individuals) who are motivated by a shared sense of identity that justifies attacking others in the name of the group (Stewart, 2006). Nazi Germany, for example, established a widespread sense of 'collectivism' built on the subordination of individuals to its collective cause (Föllmer, 2010). Citing the European conquest of the Americas, the Holocaust, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the Latin American dirty wars of the 1970s and 1980s, Moshman (2007: 116) suggests that 'genocides are perpetrated by individuals acting collectively on behalf of what they perceive to be their own group against what they perceive to be a different group'.

Colletta and Cullen (2000) propose that Hutu extremists were emboldened by a strong ethnic identity, shared goals and solidarity in the run-up to the 1994 Rwanda genocide. Similarly, in Myanmar, the

evolution from the hundreds of ethnicities that saw themselves as distinct in the postcolonial period, to the eight major ethnic groups that were established, and finally to the majority identity under Buddhism, led to what has been described as a 'slow-burning genocide' and 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' against the Rohingyas (Chowdhury, 2020: 591–592). In these examples, a shared sense of national identity tends to suit the dominant majority[14] – coming at the expense of alienating minority 'others' who do not or cannot adopt the language and culture of the dominant mainstream (Cheong et al., 2007).

Elements, albeit less extreme, of these assimilationist tendencies can be found in European refugee policy. Increases in the number of refugees seeking asylum along with racial tensions in several countries have intensified domestic concerns around social cohesion and national identity (Strang and Ager, 2010). As a consequence, the granting of citizenship increasingly depends on whether refugees can reflect and conform to a host country's values. In France, for example, 'applicants must prove assimilation into French society by adhering to the fundamental values and principles of the Republic, displaying a sufficient knowledge of French history, culture and business and speaking French' (Holloway et al., 2022: 5).

Likewise, Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom require applicants to pass a citizenship test and prove they can speak a sufficient level of the national language (Holloway et al., 2021a; 2021b; Bailey-Morley and Kumar, forthcoming).

5.2   Legal implications for refugee rights, status and citizenship

A second related issue concerns the legal implications of social cohesion. Social cohesion neither provides a pathway to citizenship nor is it a durable solution (Rodgers, 2020). By sidestepping the legal implications of integration and inclusion, social cohesion becomes something of a halfway house, where questions around legal rights, status and access to services are glossed over or ignored altogether. This can suit political agendas, such as those of national governments reluctant to allow more than temporary protection to refugees. For example, while the government of Lebanon has strongly rejected any form of local integration of Syrian refugees, social cohesion has been articulated as a strategic priority in regional and national responses (Guay, 2015). In promoting social cohesion in this way, the priority for most Lebanese political and religious leaders is ensuring internal stability and security rather than meeting the needs of Syrian refugees (Cox et al., 2021).

But the relationship works both ways. While relying on social cohesion as a framework in host countries can undermine refugee rights, a lack of legal status can equally erode opportunities for building cohesion. In order to feel safe and participate in local communities, refugees must have access to *de jure* rights, such as residency and livelihoods (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2022: 45). Social interactions may be avoided altogether by displaced people with irregular status. In Tanzania, for example, many undocumented refugees and migrants stay indoors in order to keep a low profile, hide their identity and

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14   There are also examples where national and ethnic identity is used by a non-dominant majority against a minority political elite, such as the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda (Greenberg, 2011).

avoid arrest, fines and deportations (Wilson et al., 2021). Adopting a similar strategy, Rohingya refugees in Malaysia altered their lifestyle and habits, for example by staying at home and avoiding travel outside the neighbourhood (Wake and Cheung, 2016). In these examples, marginalisation and outsider status represent important coping mechanisms for avoiding detection by the authorities and enabling ongoing mobility (de Berry and Roberts, 2018).

Yet, neither social cohesion nor legal status should be forced on displaced people. Some refugees prefer not to invest time and effort in social interactions with hosts because they intend to move on as soon as possible. For many refugees arriving in Europe, they do not wish to claim asylum and be legally recognised in the first country they encounter, as it prevents their opportunities for onward migration towards their final European destination of choice, where they may have friends or family members waiting for them (Brekke and Brochmann, 2015; Takle and Seeberg, 2015; Montagna et al., 2021). In Malta, refugees and migrants often arrive unintentionally when their boats are blown off course, and as they have no intention of staying, neither the Maltese nor the refugees are looking for social cohesion or legal recognition (Losi and Strang, 2008).

In other scenarios, refugees' rejection of integration is underpinned by political motives. Palestinian refugees have been displaced for more than 70 years, but many are reluctant to change their temporary status and integrate permanently into the countries in which they now live for fear it would negate their right of return to Palestine (Feldman, 2014; Andersen, 2016). In this context, social cohesion can come at the expense of other values, raising questions about what and how much people are willing to forgo in order to maintain social cohesion (Chan et al., 2006).

5.3   Differing priorities, preferences and aspirations

The preceding examples highlight the array of different priorities, preferences and aspirations among both refugees and the communities that host them. In spite of this, much of the literature (and, by extension, most policymakers and practitioners) tends to understand social cohesion in terms of a fixed relationship between homogenous groups of refugees and hosts. This overlooks the heterogeneity, flux and change of 'hosts' and 'refugees' categories. Both categories comprise different groups of actors characterised by a range of differing socioeconomic statuses, socio-cultural-ethnic affinities, political associations, nationalities and ethnicities, genders and generations.

For example, perceptions and preferences of newly arrived refugees may differ significantly from those of refugees who arrived decades ago, or who were born in exile. Likewise, in contexts of protracted displacement, refugees can become hosts who have assimilated or become naturalised over time. In 2014 the Tanzanian government granted citizenship to some 200,000 former Burundian refugees who had fled their country in 1972 (UNHCR, 2014). As well as duration of exile, where refugees live and the local-level dynamics they experience there also contribute to differing perceptions and preferences (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2022). In Iraq, Syrian refugees felt more welcomed and able to participate

safely in the community in Dahuk (Kurdistan Region) than in Erbil city (IOM, 2016). Viewed from these perspectives, host and refugee groups are not static, and community is a fuzzy concept with permeable boundaries (de Berry and Roberts, 2018).

A second issue apparent in much of social cohesion thinking is that the primary concern and the starting point for many studies and interventions is the host community and how it feels about refugees. Much less attention has been paid to refugee perspectives and preferences, including the factors that influence how refugees perceive their hosts, as well as other groups of refugees. This gap limits knowledge and understanding about the needs and rights of refugees, including their current level of participation in local communities and opportunities to enhance these in safe and dignified ways (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2022). Addressing these perspectives becomes particularly important when different groups of refugees, including those on opposing sides of a conflict, find themselves living side by side in camps following displacement (Easton-Calabria and Wood, 2020).

5.4   Implications for research

Rather than accepting social cohesion as an inherent good, research should take a critical approach to properly address and better understand the associated risks and limitations of the concept, especially for marginalised and minority groups and displaced groups without legal protection, and accounting for differing interests within groups of refugees and host community members. Thus, a cross- and intersectional approach that considers dynamics within sub-groups and communities is needed.

To address these points, this study will refocus attention back to the people affected by displacement and prioritise the aspects of social cohesion that matter to them. It will analyse the factors that affect the quality of relationships between refugees and host communities as well as within refugee communities. Starting from the perspectives of both refugees and hosts will broaden the analysis to how displacement influences the capacity and willingness not only to host, but also to be hosted.

Box 5   Problematising social cohesion in displacement: possible research questions

- How do displaced and host communities understand social cohesion in their own context and terms?
- How do priorities for social cohesion change over time among displaced people and host communities?
- What are the unintended effects of aid on social cohesion in displacement settings?

6 Conclusion

In spite of its prominence among humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors, there remains little consensus on how social cohesion should be defined, monitored or evaluated. What is more, social cohesion is not inherently good – like all social processes it carries underlying risks, limitations, inconsistencies and trade-offs. Not only are there limits to what interventions driven by external aid actors can ultimately achieve, but interventions can have unintended impacts. The kind of aid that is given, the mechanisms through which it is distributed, and the people selected to receive it can all have a bearing on social cohesion between groups. However, these limitations have not deterred aid actors working in displacement settings from attempting to address social cohesion, even without a clear understanding of what 'it' is.

To address some of the issues, this paper has explored the various ways in which social cohesion is understood, operationalised, influenced and problematised in displacement settings and responses. Building on early definitions and interventions as well as contemporary approaches and contexts, the paper has sought to identify issues, gaps, opportunities and implications for research. To address some of these issues, HPG research will be framed by four overarching questions:

- What aspects of social cohesion matter to displacement-affected communities?
- What factors drive or undermine social cohesion between and within refugee and host communities?
- What is the role of aid in shaping social cohesion?
- How might aid actors contribute to better social cohesion outcomes for affected people?

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